

Learning in Cities to Create Sustainable Societies

Roberta Piazza

Abstract:

Cities play a leading role in addressing many of the global challenges of the 21st century. They are an important part of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, which assigns them multiple tasks. Cities should be committed to reducing the ecological footprint and to creating solutions that respond in a differentiated way to the challenges and opportunities in different areas of the world. The sustainable development strategies of cities have determined the definition of different urban models, focused on the need to offer citizens well-being and innovation. This contribution presents the model of learning cities (LC), cities that put learning and education at the heart of their strategies. The paper identifies some of the possible strategies to make cities more responsive to the learning needs arising from the recent pandemic crisis.

Keywords: City; COVID-19; Governance; Learning; Sustainability

1. Why we Need to Care for Cities

Cities play a key role in the lives of most people. Not only do more than half of the world's population live in urban areas, but they are fundamental to social and economic development as engines of national and regional economies. Cities, moreover, as pointed out by the UN Population Division, play a leading role in addressing many of the global challenges of the 21st century, such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, environmental degradation and climate change (UN Habitat 2022).

This is why they are an important part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development because it is expected that the world's urban areas, in absorbing almost all future population growth, will be able to influence future changes.

Cities have the potential to reduce the ecological footprint, connect rural and natural environments and create solutions that respond in a differentiated way to the challenges and opportunities that States face in different areas of the world. Their role is also confirmed by UNESCO's 2030 Agenda, which identifies a specific objective for the development of sustainable cities and communities among the 17 objectives (SDGs) of the Agenda (UN 2015).

SDG 11 («Make cities [...] inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable») (UNESCO 2017, 5) addresses key issues such as affordable housing, sustainable

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mobility, participatory urban planning and air quality. However, an important indicator of the pervasiveness of the role of urban areas in supporting sustainable development is the presence of other objectives related to the competencies and responsibilities of cities in all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): not only in the SDGs relating to health (SDG 3), economic development (SDG 10), peace (SDG 16) and the fight against climate change (SDG 13) but, above all, in the objectives of SDG 4 («Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all») (UNESCO 2017, 22), which establishes lifelong learning as a guiding principle for building more sustainable cities and achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Indeed, the outbreak of the pandemic and the emergence of the massive economic crisis have shown that there is no alternative to the SDGs. This has led to the recognition of the role of cities in addressing the global problems that have arisen: social inclusion, inequalities, opportunities for education and training, the environment, etc. In ensuring prosperity and well-being for communities, international and national governments and local and regional governments are therefore called to design interventions that strengthen the resilience of cities in the face of the current economic recession and counteract the feeling of insecurity resulting from the spread of the pandemic.

Many cities have faced a significant loss of inclusive and cohesive power, with the increased exclusion and segregation of some groups, generally the most disadvantaged. Problems of integration, racist and xenophobic behaviour, and the increase of forms of social marginality have caused the loss of a sense of community, creating efficient governance problems in cities in a context increasingly dominated by the scarcity of public resources.

The sustainable development strategies of cities, focusing on the need to identify concrete actions to support lifelong learning in communities, therefore aim to increase skills and transfer knowledge, as essential tools to promote the well-being of communities. However, they argue that only the sectoral approach (Sector-Wide Approach, SWAp) (Oksanen 2000) at different levels of government – from central to local, with the involvement of different stakeholders and civil society – can respond to the economic and social security needs of communities and meet the learning needs of all citizens. Economic development, social and cultural development of cities are based on integrated actions, aimed at strengthening the ability of cities to react and adapt to constant change (UNESCO 2016). Studies on the resilience of cities show that only where there are cohesive communities and high levels of social capital are the chances of recovery faster than in cities without social cohesion. Only cities that provide the conditions for inclusive processes of learning and innovation are likely to progress more than others (Tibitt 2014). These are the elements that help define learning cities (LC), cities that put learning and education at the heart of their strategies, and that political actions of economic development should not neglect.

2. City Models: Learning Cities

If we consider the different models of cities that have developed globally, it is possible to identify as a common feature the attempt to respond to the problems arising from urban development strategies that are not sensitive to social and environmental sustainability. The Green City (OECD 2011), Smart City, Healthy City¹, EcCowell City (Kearns 2012a, 2012b), Resilient City (OECD 2018)² are characterised by particular specialisms, as demonstrated by their focus on technological dimensions, public health or creativity. In some cases, such as the Learning City, Health City and Green City initiatives, these cities share common interests. This makes it easier to realise the benefits for cities if we adopt integrated strategies that recognise these common interests. The EcCoWell Cities, for example, developed within the observatory PASCAL³, are identified as «Cities that promote community, a shared identity, and the well-being of all citizens» (Kearns 2012a, 11). These cities aim at an integrated development that includes ecology, culture, community, and well-being within the objectives and strategies of lifelong learning (Kearns 2012a, 2012b).

The Learning City is a model now well known internationally (Longworth and Osborne 2010), whose origins date back to the work begun by the OECD in the early Nineties (OECD 1993). They represent a model of development oriented towards the integration of the economic, political, social, cultural and environmental dimensions for the enhancement of the talents of all citizens. Learning is the keyword in this idea of a city, within the framework offered by lifelong learning, which is considered to be the engine for local and regional regeneration. As Norman Longworth, one of the founding fathers of Learning City, reminds us, «a learning city provides both a structural and a mental framework which allows its citizen to understand and react positively to change» (1999, 110). It is, therefore, a learning community whose task is to provide answers to the changes taking place at the global and local level, learning to become prosperous, inclusive and sustainable (Faris and Peterson 2000). The term learning is different from the usual meaning related to traditional educational contexts. In Learning City learning refers to the collective culture of all the actors of a region in designing and implementing social and economic innovations and this implies, for the formal and non-formal education sector, the action of new strategies and the construction of new types of relations with the different economic, social and cultural actors.

¹ «A healthy» city «is continually creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and developing to their maximum potential» (WHO 1998, 13).

² See <<https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regionaldevelopment/resilient-cities.htm>> (2023-03-15).

³ The EcCoWell City was born within the PASCAL Observatory, which will be discussed later.

Putting learning and knowledge at the heart of the development of cities implies a reconsideration of the role of the city. Building a learning city cannot be limited to creating more learning opportunities. Nor does it imply the involvement of subjects in learning activities, often for purposes related to employability, according to a vision of the city as an economic entity (Plumb et al. 2006). The critical point is to support people (from children up to adulthood or old age), in acquiring new skills or new content, to become lifelong learners, able to interpret learning as a journey, a path, rather than an isolated event (Piazza 2015).

Learning city therefore explicitly promotes lifelong learning by encouraging people to self-guide themselves in their learning pathways and to develop a sense of self as an autonomous and self-regulating person. At the same time, it is called upon to encourage institutions to incorporate within their missions a different vision of cities: the aim is to create communities that recognise the value of their learning, as a tool to support the challenges posed by the economic crisis, but above all, as an engine for future planning.

The importance of the LC model is such that, in 2012, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) launched the development of the International LC Platform. The platform aims to create a network intended at mobilising cities and demonstrating how to use the resources available to them effectively in every sector, to develop and enrich the human potential that cities possess. The objectives are linked to supporting the growth of the lifelong person, the development of equality and social justice, the maintenance of social cohesion and the creation of sustainable prosperity (UNESCO 2013). UNESCO acknowledges that the principles and values identified as key features of the LC (UNESCO 2015) – focused on learning as an engine for the development of cities – are also applicable to those living in rural and remote areas, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities. This has allowed, in fact, the widespread diffusion of the model, so much to reach in 2020 230 cities from 64 countries in the world that have joined the network⁴.

In the development of learning cities, a contribution is offered by the Place And Social Capital And Learning (PASCAL) Observatory, founded in 2002, an international observatory focused on local development and learning cities and regions⁵. The Observatory's activities include the creation of the Learning

⁴ Cf. <<http://pascalobservatory.org/pascalnow/pascal-activities/news/unesco-global-network-learning-cities-welcomes-55-new-member-cities>> (2023-03-15). The Italian cities in the network are Turin (2016); Fermo (2018); Palermo (2019); Lucca (2020); Trieste (2020) (<<http://www.unesco.it/it/ItaliaNellUnesco/Detail/192>> [2023-03-15]).

⁵ <<http://pascalobservatory.org/>>. PASCAL is an international network of locally engaged researchers, policy analysts, decision-makers and professionals from the administration, higher education, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector. The objective of PASCAL is the development and renewal of cities and regions. The network places particular emphasis on the role of social capital and lifelong learning in local renewal processes, focusing on the processes of sustainable economic, social and cultural development for the benefit of the communities concerned. But PASCAL also focuses on the sharing of ideas and knowledge between cities and regions, recognising that it is at the local level that

Cities Network (LCN)⁶, a network of stakeholder groups within cities, exchanging ideas and direct experiences to develop innovative responses to problems affecting cities. The LCN was built on the positive experience derived from the programme implemented between 2011 and 2013 by PASCAL, called PIE (Pascal International Exchanges)⁷, aimed at building sustainable learning cities. The network includes local administrators, academics and associations. The goal is to network regional and national administrations, businesses and work organisations, and establish links with different stakeholders. Networks can develop flexibly, both concerning the participation of members and depending on the priorities identified. The topics addressed include the implementation of integrated approaches to the development of cities built for the well-being of citizens and their families; the relationship between rural and urban learning initiatives; the role of cultural policies in building learning cities; learning cities' contribution to addressing disadvantage and fostering inclusion; building learning cities entrepreneurship-based; developing learning cities faith-based.

The LC model, like other city models, is a crucial resource for national governments – entrusted with the task of providing the regulatory and strategic framework that underpins lifelong learning – and for local governments committed to supporting the creation of sustainable cities.

This model reinforces the concept of 'social' sustainability, aimed at limiting economic dimensions to the benefit of social ones. In a sustainable society, all citizens are encouraged to imagine and create a future in which the means of economic and social security contribute to the sustainability of society as a whole. Social sustainability refers to a positive and long-term condition within communities and community processes that can achieve and maintain this condition. Therefore, the indicators to be considered in the creation and implementation of socially sustainable cities give priority to equity in access to key services (health, education, transport, housing...); the system of cultural relations which supports and promotes cultural integration; the widespread political participation of citizens, at a local level; mechanisms enabling a community to identify its strengths and needs and to meet its needs through community action.

In a design vision, the concept of social sustainability, focusing on the medium to long term future, draws attention to ideas and actions that can help improve society in the present, and to ensure its maintenance for future generations (Willis et al. 2008, 9).

the greatest impact of policy action can often be achieved to ensure a regional competitive advantage (<<http://pascalobservatory.org/about/introduction>>, [2023-03-15]).

⁶ <<https://lcn.pascalobservatory.org/>> (2023-03-15).

⁷ The PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE) project aims to mediate and support exchange, on a bilateral or multilateral basis, between local, community and city agencies and organisations in different parts of the world. Its goal is to connect those sites that have specific missions, including neighbourhood learning centres and libraries, with cultural heritage institutions and make a distinctive contribution to lifelong learning, to build innovative learning communities that promote the well-being and quality of life of all citizens (<<http://pie.pascalobservatory.org/>> [2023-03-15]).

3. Learning in Cities after COVID-19: Directions for the Future

Cities have been at the forefront in responding to the COVID-19 crisis and in continuing to pursue sustainable development goals. The pandemic has had a different impact at the local level, but many policy responses have been undifferentiated and not very attentive to territorial specificities. These choices, mostly determined by the emergency, highlighted the need for approaches based on local characteristics and centred on people.

The health crisis has turned into a severe economic and social shock and has surprisingly brought to light the inequality between people and places, especially in large cities, where vulnerable groups such as migrants, the poor, women and the elderly have been hardly affected (UN 2020a).

The progress made in the southern hemisphere over the past decade has certainly enabled cities to move towards sustainability, inclusion, better governance and poverty reduction objectives. However, the spread of the virus and the economic and political impact of the global crisis might impede, or even reverse, the significant progress made towards achieving such progress. Considering the profound inequalities between rich and poor areas of the world and the magnitude of the global crisis created by COVID-19, cities will experience the exacerbation of pre-existing problems (Martínez and Short 2021).

Digitalization, an important turning point during the crisis, has become a key component of a 'new normality'. However, the ability to work and learn at a distance has shown profound differences both between countries and within the same nation (UN 2020b). In adult education, a large percentage of users have been excluded from online and distance learning because they lack access to the Internet or do not have the skills to use digital technology. Even for adult education professionals, the pandemic has meant a revision of their digital skills, not always adequate to provide support to students in the changed learning conditions (Baltaci 2021).

In addition, the 'Greta effect' – understood as Greta Thunberg's ability to influence social groups and mobilise collective action to reduce global warming – has accelerated environmental awareness, making the transition to clean mobility and the circular economy more politically and socially acceptable (Sabherwal et al. 2021).

The shock caused by COVID-19 has called for greater attention to the resilience of cities⁸. The ability to be ready to face future crises has highlighted the need for local administrators to competently manage unpredictable situations and to learn in complex situations. Resilience – an important dimension that characterises the learning cities of the future – refers to the ability of cities to

⁸ The effect of learning on the resilience of cities has been discussed in academic literature for several years, often in terms of the ability of local people to identify and respond to disruptions in the event of a major disaster (Robin et al. 2019). The notion of resilience in cities is present in SDG 11 and reiterated in Learning Cities and the SDGs: A Guide to Action (UIL 2017) as an approach to linking global goals to local communities (Atchoarena and Howells 2021).

transform themselves to protect vulnerable people from immediate threats, but also, according to the already introduced concept of social sustainability, to build answers for future emergencies. This requires the administrations to rethink urban policies. These should be aimed primarily at strengthening the capacity of administrations to respond to emergencies, and to make cities smarter, greener, more inclusive and resilient (UNESCO 2020, 6).

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that cities not only need resources but also need their citizens to be educated to act properly. The learning city model supports a vision of adult education and community education oriented towards social justice, which encourages the participation of all citizens. Within this model of the city, the right to citizenship is conceived as closely related to individual and collective participation in the living environment, in opposition to exclusively market-oriented values, which often guide education policies. Such a discourse requires to be supported by an effective lifelong learning implementation strategy, which is the basis of the learning city model. As Jarl Bengtsson (2013) had already pointed out, there is no universal strategy, but every nation, every city, and every administration is called to develop its strategy, considering the significant differences existing in the political context, economic, social and educational.

The pandemic crisis has shown that there are several political issues all countries have in common. The first problem is to create the basis for central government and local government to coordinate planning and strategies to support lifelong learning. Planning and actions must concern, vertically, the different actors of the education and training system, with the fundamental aim of identifying and adopting the unique contribution that each stakeholder can offer in promoting lifelong learning. At the horizontal level, it is necessary to promote the fundamental coordination between government at the national and regional levels and the involvement of areas relating to education, the economy, work and social affairs. An important issue is the need to create a coherent and sustainable lifelong learning funding system, based on public and private funding and the personal contribution that each person can offer.

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